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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAR JONATHAN MITCHELL

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [GJ](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS ENDS NEW NATIONAL PARTY 13 YEAR RULE

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Grenada's main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), won a landslide victory on July 8, 2008, taking eleven of fifteen seats in the lower house of Parliament. With 80 percent of registered voters voting, NDC won 50.97 percent to the New National Party's (NNP) 47.77 percent of the vote. All other political parties contesting the election together garnered less than 2 percent of the vote. NDC political leader Tillman Thomas was sworn in as Grenada's new Prime Minister July 9. The initial reaction of NDC supporters was a giddy euphoria after thirteen years out of power (and 25 years for some of them). The outgoing Prime Minister, Keith Mitchell, whose New National Party won only four seats (including his), promised to lead a "constructive opposition" to the NDC government. Reports of threats of reprisals by NDC operatives and supporters are rising as the newly empowered NDC followers publicly beat Mitchell in effigy and threatened to "take care of" their non-NDC rivals. Civil society groups dropped all pretense of non-partisanship to take to the stage with the NDC celebrating the ousting of the NNP and Keith Mitchell. End Summary.

Elections Deemed Free and Fair

[¶2.](#) (U) Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) Ambassador Albert Ramdin declared Grenada's July 8 elections as "free and fair." Ramdin called on the new government to deal with problems with the electoral list immediately rather than waiting for the next election, but pronounced himself generally satisfied with the conduct of the election. The separate July 4 police vote went smoothly and the secure retention of the marked ballots over the weekend also worked well. There were 38 observers and volunteers under the auspices of the OAS election observer mission, including five USG employees from Embassy Bridgetown.

Euphoria Reigns

[¶3.](#) (U) National Democratic Congress (NDC) party members and followers danced in the streets after the results were announced on July 8. The ruling New National Party (NNP) had been seeking an unprecedented fourth term, but retained only four seats. Tillman Thomas was sworn in as Prime Minister on July 9 and the celebrations continued throughout the day.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) NDC members, especially those who joined the party after the 1999 elections and therefore had never been in the majority, were giddy and gleeful by turns. NDC supporters dragged effigies of Mitchell attached to long pieces of rope in the street and kicked and beat the figures. While Thomas called for healing and promised good governance, even he could not resist taking potshots at the losers. Others, less diplomatic, called outright for revenge and denounced anyone supporting the NNP or either of the two labor parties, Grenada United Labour Party (GULP) and the People's Labour Movement (PLM) (jointly known as the United Labour Platform for this election). Reports of threats of reprisals against former government officials, NNP, and members of Grenada's labor coalition parties (which won no seats in the election) are surfacing. This includes one socio-political commentator who told Charge d'Affaires that he has received threats and fears for his life if he continues to

write articles critical of the government. He has already told the editor of the paper that carries his column that he likely will resign.

¶5. (SBU) After thirteen years out of power, it may take the NDC some time to organize its government. NDC operatives initially locked government workers out of the ministries on July 10 and put party operatives in offices to watch the workers when they were finally allowed in, which as one post contact told Charge, carries echoes of the methods of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) in power from 1979 to 1983. (NOTE: About 15 to 20 members of the NDC who joined the party after it failed in 1999 to win any seats, were active members of the PRG and the People's Revolutionary Army (PRA) who left Grenada after the revolution's collapse in 1983 and returned in the mid to late 1990's. Tillman Thomas was also a participant, but was imprisoned after working on opening a newspaper with 19 others. He is one of the few original members of the NDC (founded in the 1980's) left in a party leadership position. END NOTE) One employee in the Prime Minister's ministry was taken by police to the Criminal Investigations Unit (CID) for taking documents out of the office. The documents turned out to be personal papers, but instead of determining this while still in the office, the woman was subjected to a six hour interrogation and publicly humiliated.

¶6. (U) The government promised to announce ministerial assignments as quickly as possible, but it will likely take several days for the new government to organize itself. In addition, senators must be nominated for appointment to the upper house of Parliament. Most likely, several of the losers in the election will be named senators and then assigned ministries. Even if all the pieces are in place in the next week, the process may be complicated by Carnival which will take place on August 11-12 this year. Very little business gets done

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during the first two weeks of August.

¶7. (SBU) The NDC will likely ask Governor General Sir Daniel Williams to resign so the government can put forward someone more to its liking. Again, it is not yet clear how quickly this might happen. Sir Danny, a long-time NNP supporter, appeared quite upset during the swearing in ceremony, though during the cocktail party that followed, he appeared his usual cheerful self.

Promises to Keep

¶8. (SBU) Once the government is in place, it will need to lower the public's expectations. During the campaign, the NDC promised to lower the cost of living, provide free health care to all, give free school books to all school children, provide free college education to all who qualify, fix the public service, and more. The country's debt level is currently 126 percent of GDP. The government will be constrained as well by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) standby program and other financial obligations. There will be very little wiggle room with the budget. Eventually, the government will have to implement a value added tax, as recommended by the IMF, the EU, the U.S., and others, especially if it does eliminate the 5 percent hurricane recovery tax (HRT) as promised. The HRT expires at the end of the year and the government may find excuses to leave it in place until then if it cannot find quickly other sources of income.

¶9. (SBU) Among the promises the new government will find itself pressed to make good on almost immediately, is to provide free school books to all students. Grenadians are already beginning to purchase books for the next school year and are asking how they will be reimbursed. The other campaign promise that the local population is looking forward to taking advantage of is an allowance for each Grenadian to import one barrel of goods each duty-free between now and Christmas. Quite a few Grenadians are making plans for family members to each order everything they can. If even half the population takes them up on this, the government will lose a great deal of customs duties.

¶10. (SBU) Political promises made during the campaign are also much on people's minds, including amending the constitution to limit a prime minister to two terms. Bishop Darius, active in civil society, told Charge that he is worried NDC might conveniently forget this promise now that it is in power.

Not Very Civil Society

¶11. (SBU) Non-governmental organizations in Grenada are generally highly partisan although they protest otherwise. It was instructive to see how many NGO members of the Campaign Watchdog Group (CWG) joined NDC candidates on the campaign platforms throughout the campaign as well as on the winners' platforms Tuesday night celebrating "freedom from bondage suffered since the collapse of the revolution in 1983" as well as a "return from the wilderness" after 13 years of an NNP government. One CWG member apparently browbeat election officials to allow her to vote in a district she neither lives in nor is registered in because she wanted to support the particular NDC candidate, and then boasted about her success to a USG employee!

¶12. (U) Trinidadian political journalist and commentator Andy Johnson, in Grenada for the election week, appeared on the July 10 edition of the Grenada Broadcast Network's early morning television program. He questioned NGO and labor representative guests about whether there was any contradiction between their self-declared neutrality and their direct and public participation in political party campaign rallies and victory activities on the platforms. The Grenadian host of the show and the guests appeared nonplussed by the question and struggled to provide an answer.

A Constructive Opposition

¶13. (U) Former Prime Minister Keith Mitchell, who won his own seat by a huge majority, conceded defeat on Tuesday night, even as haggling continued over one seat (which the NNP was later confirmed to have won). He promised to lead a constructive opposition and called on all NNP members to accept the results of the democratic vote and work with the winners. Appearing relaxed and comfortable on television at his private residence, Mitchell promised that he would lead a constructive opposition and work with the ruling party in the House of Representatives to the benefit of the country.

¶14. (SBU) Post confirmed rumors first heard on election day that the NDC ordered all official vehicles and the PM's bodyguards back to police barracks on July 8, leaving Mitchell exposed for over 24 hours before power shifted to Thomas. Mitchell told Charge that on July 8, he found himself stranded at the office with no way to get home. He called home to have a member of his household bring his car to pick him up. In Grenada, the losing prime minister retains power until the moment when the Governor General swears in the new prime minister. There is a several minute power gap between when the new PM verbally takes the oaths and when he signs the book recording his assumption of duties. It would appear to be a deliberate act by the NDC to leave Mitchell vulnerable.

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¶15. (SBU) Mitchell told Charge that he will be quiet: "you won't hear from me for a while" and allow the new government to function. He promised that he will work with the government on programs vital to the development of the country, adding that it is the country that is important, not one person. That said, NNP spokesman Terry Forrester has been very vocal over the last several days about reported threats against NNP supporters and the removal of security and vehicles from the outgoing PM while he was still in power. It remains to be seen how the NNP will operate in Parliament as an opposition, whether constructive as Mitchell has promised or obstructive as the NDC often pursued such as walking out of Parliament en masse over perceived slights.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) NDC leaders attribute their win to the winds of change blowing across the Caribbean. Perhaps as likely an explanation was Keith Mitchell's 13 years in office, the longest of any Grenadian Prime Minister. Many Grenadians were leery of granting Mitchell and the NNP a fourth term, but worried about the former PRG/PRA members in the NDC. Ultimately, the worry about length of time in office - a fourth term could have potentially given the NNP 18 years in office - appears to have trumped the fear of former revolutionaries. In the last week of campaigning, the NDC compared Mitchell to Mugabe - the old corrupt leader who will not give up power, using pictures of the two (not actually together but doctored to seem so and often in

similar outfits) to make their point.

¶17. (SBU) The contrast between the NDC and NNP promises came into sharper focus late in the campaign when the NDC finally released a manifesto - an almost verbatim copy of the Barbados' Democratic Labour Party's (DLP) manifesto - that gained traction. It literally promised more than the NNP manifesto did, including free health care for all, an over 100 percent increase in pensions for some Grenadians, free college education for all, and other government hand outs. That no explanation was provided as to how all this largesse would be paid for seemed beside the point. For a population still suffering the effects of Hurricane Ivan, rising food and fuel costs, and an overall increase in poverty, these promises may have helped many undecided voters to vote for the NDC. Also a factor in any Grenadian campaign is how much money is given directly to the voters, either through make-work jobs like bushing or direct monetary handouts. We understand the Chinese were major contributors to the NDC, both in cash and in kind and grudgingly gave much less to the NNP. The Ambassador from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was not at Thomas' swearing in and when Charge asked an NDC insider why, she was told that the Venezuelans had given more money to the NNP than to the NDC.

¶18. (SBU) Finally, Mitchell appears to have overestimated the strength of the youth vote and underestimated the appeal of experienced versus inexperienced candidates. The NNP fielded more first-time candidates than the NDC. While several of them did quite well and ran close races, they all ultimately lost to more seasoned campaigners. This may position the NNP well for future elections as the older politicians retire and the party can turn to younger pols with some campaign experience, but it did not work this time around. End Comment.

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